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Opening the West: Federal Internal Improvements Before 1860

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Book Reviews

Opening the West: Federal Internal Improvements before 1860, by Laurence J. Malone. Contributions in Economics and Economic History, No. 196. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. xvi, 176 pp. Graphs, tables, figures, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JOHN LAURITZ LARSON, PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Opening the West offers a straightforward example of quantitative economic analysis performed on a historically important collection of data in order to test hypotheses widely assumed to be true by economists and historians alike. Since the 1960s, based on the work of Carter Goodrich and others, students of American economic development and government policy have repeated the claim that before the Civil War the government of the United States played no significant role in developing the interior West or stimulating economic growth. Private investors, aided in many cases by important state-level public expenditures, were thought to be responsible for the energy and direction of economic growth, while the federal government played at best a secondary role building the relatively low-tech National Road, removing indigenous populations, occasionally granting lands, and sometimes lending the technical expertise of army engineers. Goodrich's *Government Promotion of American Canals and Railroads, 1800-1890* (1960) appears to exhaust the relevant statistical information to arrive at this conclusion, and subsequent economists have seen little reason or evidence to contradict it.

Until now. Economist Malone has computerized and analyzed the data found in a comprehensive congressional report (*Serial Set 1992*, 47th Congress, 1st Session, 1882) that itemizes federal expenditures for public buildings, rivers, harbors, forts, and other public works since 1789. Doubtless unknown to Goodrich and his students, this magnificent document tabulates from official sources the appropriations, actual expenditures, and revenues returned to the treasury for every public works project aided by Congress. Handled with care (as it is in this book), such a cache of numbers makes possible the generation of a variety of totals, distributions, and comparisons that could not be derived reliably from the fragmentary records used by previous analysts. If nothing else had resulted, Malone's exposure of this document and his patient explication of its contents justify the purchase of this book by every library interested in facilitating research.

In the first part of his book Malone introduces the analytical principle of "relative economic backwardness" and performs four tests on the "timing of federal internal improvement expenditures" from 1800 to 1860 (35). Across the whole period, regions with low population density received the largest average federal expenditures, with the whole curve peaking during the 1830s—*after* President Andrew Jackson supposedly ended federal aid for internal improvements! Territories that achieved statehood prior to the Jackson administration received far less federal money than those admitted after 1836. The latter also received much larger sums prior to achieving a "density threshold" of 5.9 persons per mile, suggesting an intention to encourage emigration to those territories. Finally, testing the Goodrich thesis directly, Malone finds that federal, not state, expenditures proved most concentrated in those least-developed states that scholars previously have thought were left largely to their own devices.

Armed with the results of these statistical exercises, Malone attacks important questions about the consequences of federal aid for internal improvements. Here his findings may be economically sound, but he is answering with theory questions on which historians already have a great deal of narrative information. As a result, readers familiar with the stories of frontier Arkansas, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota will find Malone's "scientific" inquiries strangely uninformed by the well-known social and political histories of those states.

Although Malone's exclusive commitment to economic methodology may discourage some readers, he nevertheless draws important conclusions from his research. Clearly the efforts of the central government to stimulate development "preceded and substituted for the spontaneous responses of economic individualism in relatively backward regions of the antebellum West" (118). Conclusions drawn from earlier research—that government nonintervention characterized antebellum public policy, or that American prosperity sprang unassisted from the ambitions of a free, entrepreneurial people—here stand refuted. Malone sketches out related questions meriting further inquiry, especially the value and importance of government actions for pacifying and removing indigenous people from the West. More than Malone seems to acknowledge, historians already are aware of and sensitive to the complexities suggested here; but such contrary evidence intrudes only gradually on the national myths of the self-made man, the heroic pioneer, the evils of government planning, and the virtues of unfettered free enterprise capitalism.

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